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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
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RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2716  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000788

SIPDIS

NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/28/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: TRIPOLI MP WANTS CABINET POST AND SAYS  
USG ASSISTANCE WILL GO FAR IN THE NORTH

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

Summary

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11. (C) Stopping by for a chat with the Charge minutes before his formal meeting with President Sleiman to cast his vote for Prime Minister, pro-March 14 independent Member of Parliament Mosbah Ahdab told the Charge that he wanted to be seriously considered for a cabinet seat in the new government, in light of the "heavy lifting" he has been doing for Saad Hariri among the Sunnis of Tripoli. He said Minister of Transportation Mohamed Safadi, also from Tripoli, had done little to contribute to either March 14 unity or the plight of the people of Tripoli and the north and did not deserve to be chosen again.

12. (C) Turning to economic issues, he urged the Charge to consider additional USG assistance programs to the north. Ahdab is particularly enthusiastic about opening the Kleyate airport for civilian traffic, saying the job creation will do much to defeat extremism in the region. End Summary.

Reassured by Siniora's Reappointment

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13. (C) Ahdab began by saying that he was pleased with the March 14 decision to keep Fouad Siniora in place as Prime Minister. "People are reassured by Siniora, especially at the grassroots level. He has done extremely well under very difficult circumstances." He hopes that Saad Hariri will spend more time in Lebanon to build up a strong political base in advance of the Spring 2009 parliamentary elections. He noted that he was enroute to Baabda Palace to see President Sleiman to voice his choice of Siniora as PM (Ahdab had the next-to-last appointment of the day).

14. (C) Ahdab emphasized how difficult the recent violence had been in Tripoli and said it was truly a blow to the pride of the northern Sunnis. "The Hariri machine fell apart on the ground and people began to lose faith in the ability of moderates to protect them." Ahdab said he had expended a great deal of personal and political capital in recent weeks to bolster the image of the Hariris in Tripoli.

Time for a Cabinet Seat....or Else

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15. (C) Ahdab was clearly making a case for why he should be chosen to participate in the new cabinet, saying Saad Hariri had already made him a promise. Ahdab said that he has consistently supported March 14 positions. He was the only

Sunni outside of the Hariris to join March 14 leaders at the 2005 Bristol Hotel conference which called for Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon. He received a number of threats after his participation in this event. He said that he came out very early last year in support of the Lebanese Armed Forces 2007 armed conflict with militants in the Nahr al-Barid (NAB) refugee camp. He helped keep the calm in the tense region and helped to prevent the spread of extremism in the north. Most recently, he received praise for his leadership in the north when Sunni forces failed to defeat extremist fighters from the opposition. Ahdab stepped into a leadership position when Samir Jisr, a Future MP, closed the party's offices in Tripoli. Ahdab gathered leading Tripoli figures together to discuss how to move forward in a positive manner.

¶6. (C) Ahdab contrasts his own performance with that of local Tripoli rival, Minister of Public Works and Transport Mohammed Safadi. He said Safadi, who returned to Lebanon in the 1990's and only entered politics in 2000, "paid for his seat" through campaign contributions and support from the Saudis. Ahdab said Safadi conveniently seems to leave town when times are tough, having been abroad during the Nahr al-Barid conflict and having flown straight to Doha from London during the recent clashes. According to Ahdab, Safadi is not a March 14 team player and has often, in the past year, come up with proposals which would weaken the coalition's political position.

¶7. (C) Ahdab told us, "I know there are those who are trying to block me, but I have put myself out on a limb quite

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frequently for the sake of March 14. If they do not ask me to participate in this government, I will have to leave March 14 because the relationship has stopped working."

Need for Greater Engagement in the North;  
Kleyate Airport  
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¶8. (C) Ahdab believes that March 14 must pay some attention to the north before it begins to lose support in the region. "In the next election, March 14 could either win 7 of 8 parliamentary seats or 1 of 8 -- it's that close."

¶9. (C) He is concerned that Hizballah SYG is trying to reach out to the "poor" of the north, particularly in the Akkar region. He urged the Charge to explore programs which would undercut Hizballah's outreach initiative. He is particularly in favor of opening the Kleyate Airport to civilian traffic in the north. The project will create jobs and more economic opportunities for the largely agricultural region, Mosbah said. He agrees that it will be important to smoothly introduce this idea, emphasizing the civilian nature of the program. "Then let Hizballah come out, object, and explain to the people why they shouldn't have this tremendous economic asset in their own back yard." Such USG assistance will go a long way in the north, according to Ahdab.

Hizballah on the Defensive,  
but March 14 Must Adopt a Unified Approach  
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¶10. (C) Ahdab believes that Hizballah is now in a much weaker position after Doha. "They tipped their hand, and now they must be on guard against Lebanese enemies, as well as Israel." Ahdab said that March 14 should push very strongly for full implementation of the Doha provisions now, "while the memory of the Arab states is fresh." Hizballah should not be allowed to derail the national unity government with extraneous demands. "We must support President Sleiman as he works to comply with the agreement."

¶11. (C) However, Ahdab said that all of this would require a unified approach by March 14. "Together, we can start to

make them more uncomfortable." He is confident that PM Siniora will be able to assemble a good team to move forward on key issues.

¶12. (C) Ahdab ended by saying that March 14 should also not be afraid to reach out to key independent or opposition figures. "We can stretch out our hand in welcome, but there must be some ground rules. They can join us if they are willing to meet certain minimal conditions for cooperation -- but we cannot allow ourselves to be used by those who are 'fair weather friends.'"

¶13. (C) He would really like to "smoothly" press former PM Najib Mikati to define his position. "If we can convince him to come to us, along with all of his money, great. But if not, we should bring this to the fore and show how his actions in support of Syria will harm his own significant financial investments in the region."

Comment

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¶14. (C) Ahdab, who has impressed a number of March 14 figures with his performance in the north, is using a full-court press lobbying technique to obtain a cabinet seat. We only hope that he does not back himself into a corner with this talk of resigning from March 14 if his wishes are not met.  
End Comment.

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